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ABSTRACT

This study examined the efficacy of parents' roles as active and discerning members of their children's Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) through the use of a large randomly selected sample with a high respondent rate. Families were selected from the special education roster in an urban district. Of the 95 families selected, 83 parents completed interviews. The data gathering effort also included interviews with more than 200 teachers and specialists in the district, observations, and document review. Although there were IEPs for all students, nine parents responded that their child was not in special education, and 28 acknowledged participation, but made only vague references to the child's needs and services. Thus, 45% of parents in this district that prided itself on support for parents did not appear to be conversant with the child's needs and services. Data also support the findings of previous studies that parents' assessments of special education services are not based on objective data, and appear to be biased in a positive direction. Until parents learn what to look for to evaluate services, they are not able to be accountable for their children's learning. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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PARENTS AS ACTIVE TEAM MEMBERS: WHERE DOES ACCOUNTABILITY FOR A CHILD'S SPECIAL EDUCATION REST?

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are explicit in calling for parents to collaborate with schools and to be actively involved in decision-making about their child's education. As part of the Team that develops a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), parents are expected to help monitor and design their child's services. The Regulations support parents' understanding their child's program by requiring school systems to inform parents about their rights and about their child's testing and progress on a regular basis. To support parents many federal and state initiatives, such as Parent Information Centers, have been established to make information available to parents and to help them learn about their rights and how to work with the schools. Exemplary are the federally established Parent Information Centers and Massachusetts' State Regulation that requires every school district to have a special education parent advisory council.

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (2000) published a Guide to the Individualized Education Program in which it clarifies the role of parents in the IEP Team. The Guide contains the following selected descriptions of parent participation:

> "Parents are key members of the IEP Team. They know their child very well and can talk about their child's strengths and needs as well as their ideas for enhancing their child's education. They can offer insight into how their child learns, what his or her interests are and other aspects of the child that only a parent can know..."
>
> "...the IEP Team will then write the child's IEP (that includes) child's strengths, parents' ideas for enhancing the child's education, results of recent evaluations or reevaluations, how the child does on state and district-wide tests."
>
> "...discussion is framed around how to help the child advance toward annual goals..."

> "Placement decision is made by a group of people including parents...*In all cases parents have a right to be members of the group that decides the educational placement of the child* [italics in original]."

At no time is any comment made that parents are only to provide information and not participate in the discussion and/or decision-making. To be a full participating member requires knowledge of a great many aspects of education.

To what extent are parents able to reach these expectations? Several researchers have looked at this question by looking at what factors form the basis of parents' feelings of satisfaction (Gibb, Young, Allred, Dyches, Egan & Ingram, 1997 and Green and Shinn 1994). They found parents did not base their feelings on objective data such as grades or achievement scores but rather parents' satisfaction related more to their perceptions of the individual attention children received, positive characteristics of the teachers, and an increase in their children's self-esteem. Mathews (1998) found parents overestimated their involvement and noted barriers such as literacy, lack of childcare, and work schedules impeded parent involvement. Also raising questions about the validity of parents perceptions is the fact that many of the recent studies using parents' perceptions have problematic methodological issues: data based on 10 or fewer parents (Stephenson, 1992; Perras, 1995), biased sample (Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline & Morrison,1995), and low return rate, e.g., 31 percent (Rivers,1990).

The purpose of this paper is to further examine the efficacy of parents' role as active discerning members of their child's IEP Team through the use of a large randomly selected sample with a high respondent rate. We will do this by looking at parents' feelings about being a member of their child's IEP Team, the appropriateness of the decisions made by their Team and their perceptions of their child's accomplishments. In addition, we will look at their ratings of the overall special education services their child received and of their child's academic progress.

METHOD

Families for this study were randomly selected from the special education roster in an urban district in the Northeast. Ninety-five students were selected using a sampling design stratified by school, grade level, time in the general education classroom, ethnicity, and home language. Parent interviews were one aspect of a comprehensive multi-faceted evaluation of special education services conducted by the authors. The parent interviews covered a broad range of topics. Interview questions relevant to parents' active participation in the IEP process included:

- What are your child's needs?
- What assistance is your child receiving that is really helping him/her?
- What is not working as well as it should or what if anything, do you feel staff should be doing to help your child be more successful?

- What are your feelings about the last Team meeting in which you prepared a new IEP?
    - Did you feel like you were an important member of the Team?
    - Do you think the decisions that were made for services were appropriate?

Also, parents were asked to use 10-point Likert scale to rate their overall satisfaction with special education services, and to rate their child's academic progress. For the latter question they were also asked, "Why did you give that rating?" Native speakers conducted interviews in Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole for parents whose primary language was not English.

The exact nature of the interviews varied somewhat due to the parents' knowledge, variation in the topics parents' raised, and their time pressures. This caused considerable variation in the number of respondents who answered each question. Therefore, we looked at each parent's full interview to gain as much information as possible related to the respondent's knowledge, actions and feelings related to active Team participation. Responses to open-ended questions were grouped by conceptual categories.

The parent interviews were part of a multi-faceted data gathering effort that included interviews with over 200 teachers and specialists throughout the district, record review, observations of most of the randomly selected children and review of referrals. Throughout this paper we draw examples from this data.

SUBJECTS

Phone interviews were conducted with a parent or guardian of 83 (87.4%) of the selected students. The ethnic backgrounds of the children of the parents interviewed were similar to the school population: Asian 7.2 percent, Hispanic 18.1 percent, White 30.1 percent, and African-American 43.4 percent. The home language was listed as English for 78.3 percent of the students. Thirty-seven percent were listed as receiving free or reduced lunch. The sample closely resembled the demographics of the school district except that the sample had 7 percent fewer parents of White students. Students represented every grade from pre-school through grade 12 and every model of service delivery from monitoring to private school placement.

SETTING

It is important to note the school district was unusual in the amount of effort it took to support parents' involvement. For example, the district hired a person to act as a special education liaison. This person was available daily in a Parent Center to answer questions in English or Spanish. Individual schools also had parent liaisons, though they were not specifically for special education. Throughout the year the Special Education Department hosted several daytime and evening workshops for parents. Appropriate notification of parents about IEP meetings was routine and for parents who were not English-speaking, all documents were translated. Schools went out of their way to involve parents in IEP meetings including going to a parent's home or providing transportation. In addition, the local Parent Advisory Council held several meetings a year and members made

themselves available to all parents. In short, parents of this school district had a number of different resources on which to draw to become efficacious IEP Team members.

FINDINGS

To investigate the efficacy of parents as IEP Team members, we looked first at parents' feelings about their participation reasoning that they needed to feel comfortable with the role in order to fulfill its requirements effectively. To determine this we asked parents to focus in on their last IEP development meeting, to describe their feelings about the meeting and to indicate whether they felt they were an important member of the Team. The parents were overwhelmingly positive. All but two of the 58 parents who answered the question felt they were an important member (96.6%). One mother felt she was important when the Team was meeting but questioned what happened afterwards. The other dissenter responded, "Not really. I am a good listener. I am not much of a talker." Nevertheless she also reported, "We have a very nice Team."

The vast majority of parents (82.1%) also felt positively about the decisions made during the IEP meeting. Of the 56 parents who answered the question about the appropriateness of the decisions only nine percent felt they were not appropriate and another nine percent had some questions about the decisions. Three of the parents were unhappy about the cutting of services. The fourth wanted her child in a regular class rather than a behavior class and the fifth complained, "He still can't read." Comments from these parents and the parents with mixed feelings indicated that many of their conflicts and questions resided not with the Team, but rather with the services the district was ready to provide. For example, one disgruntled mother said the Team recommended an aide, but one was not written into the IEP.

What was it that gave parents their feelings of satisfaction? We found that some of the reasons were very basic. Two parents mentioned simply that they "felt comfortable." Seven indicated they appreciated the time and effort professionals took to meet with the parent to talk about their child. Four said they appreciated the suggestions they received for helping their child at home What parents commented on most frequently, however, was the opportunity they had to contribute to the meeting (n=13). Most indicated this meant that the Team listened to what they had to say. Three parents, however, indicated a higher level of involvement. They stated they were asked to participate in decision making. Conversely, two mothers noted they were expected to take a passive role – "The way the whole process goes is that they want the parent to rubber stamp." This statement was supported by our review of 70 student records. With few exceptions, the IEPs were signed on the day of the IEP Meeting indicating that parents did not take and/or were not given time to think about the wealth of information presented in the meeting. In sum, while parents felt involved and most agreed with the IEP decisions, few parents described themselves as acting as full participants in the IEP meeting.

To what extent did parents possess the kind of information necessary to more fully contribute to the discussion? Two key areas IEP meeting participants must understand are

the needs and strengths of the child and the services provided. To determine parents understanding, we looked at parent's ratings of the overall all services their child received, their rating of their child's progress, and their rationale for their rating. Parents' mean rating of the overall special education services their children received was 8.3 out of a 10 point scale. We chose a ten-point scale to give parents a broad range to reflect their ratings. However, only 11 percent of the parents gave a rating of "5"or below. Thirty-seven percent of the parents gave the services the highest rating, and half rated the services "9" or above. Parents also rated their children's academic progress highly with a mean of 7.8. Again, few parents (15.1%) gave a rating of "5" or below. Are these skewed findings indicative that the special education services were excellent and the students were progressing well?

To answer this, we looked first at the basis parents gave for their ratings of academic progress? Seventeen parents provided a rationale. Half of them (52.9%) gave a vague response, such as, "She is finally doing really well this year," or "She is barely hanging on." Twenty-nine percent made a similarly vague statement but added an earlier point in time to indicate they were making a comparative statement. Only 3 parents referred to changes in specific abilities, e.g., reading, math, "holding a pencil." While the parents might have become more specific if probed to give examples, the findings raise the question of whether the majority grounded their ratings on specifiable changes. Vague statements about change make it difficult to determine the extent or type progress made and to relate changes to service delivery.

Further questions about the validity of parents' ratings of special education services and academic progress were raised when comments in the interviews suggested that parent's feelings were different from their ratings or they did not understand what they were rating. Such an example is a parent who gave an "8" rating for overall services and then declared, "To be honest with you, I don't think (special education) is helping." Another example is a bilingual parent who gave a "10" rating but then stated "things are unclear" to her.

Some of our classroom observations of the children of satisfied parents also raised questions about the validity of parents' assessments. Of course, a single observation is rarely definitive. However, we observed a number of situations in which inappropriate services were undeniable. Such a situation concerned a preschooler who was hearing impaired and nonverbal. Her mother was "happy with everything" except with the fact that instead of a speech therapist her daughter was seeing a college intern. However, the child's IEP stated she should be in a total communication classroom and neither the teacher nor any of the children had any knowledge of Sign Language. The student was unable to communicate with any of her peers or the teacher. The teacher made no effort to have her participate in the classroom activities, only attempting to keep her occupied and quiet. Another parent who gave a "10" rating had a son who was repeating a grade with an IEP on which not one objective was changed from the year he failed.

These incongruities raised further questions of the extent to which parents in this system possess the knowledge and understanding to effectively participate in their child's IEP

decisions. To delve more deeply into this, we decided to search each interview for the availability of information that is needed to make critical decisions about service delivery: information about the child's strengths and needs, information about services, and information about the child's progress given a particular mixture of services. Because parents have to voice their opinion to participate, we also included a criterion related to taking action. We used Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of levels of thinking as a guide so that the participatory groups show a progression of thinking that moves roughly from knowledge and comprehension, through application and analysis to synthesis and evaluation. In addition, parents with a higher participatory rating would be expected to demonstrate they were more proactive. Five levels of parent participation were developed:

Non-Participant – Parent is unaware of special education services or states child is not receiving services.

Naive Participant – Parent knows child is involved in special education.

1. Describes child's need(s) in vague terms, e.g. knows some areas of concerns about child
2. Describes some aspect of schooling that may or may not be related to special education services, e.g., describes how child feels about school, knows child receives speech therapy
3. States some reference to progress relevant to special education needs,
4. Expressed desire for change is vague
   Indicative comment- *"They offer him some extra help he needs to get his education and do the work he needs to do....I was very pleased with the (IEP Meeting) report. There was a lot of improvement."*

Novice Participant

1. Provides example(s) of child's strengths and needs related to special education
2. Describes some aspect of the special education services child is receiving
3. Makes some reference to progress relevant to IEP
4. Reports acting to correct perceived wrong, but may not give special education rationale.
   Indicative comment - *"He gets speech therapy. Is in self-contained class. Teachers are helping....He has come a long way. He has ADD that holds him back....They visited the high school with his teacher. He might take two or three classes – cooking, carpentry."*

Intermediate Participant –

1. Describes specific examples demonstrating child's strengths and needs related to special education
2. Describes specific aspects of special education programming relevant to child
3. Questions relationship between programming and child's outcomes
4. Reports initiating actions related to understanding of special education

Indicative Comment - *"He has 1 on 1 for math. OT for writing. He forms letters correctly but has difficult time with retrieval....Can take in info, but can't give it back quickly....It's hard to get from ideas in his head to paper. He can report it verbally....I had him tested at General Hospital Center in '92. They recommended extra speech which we give him at Best Clinic...."*

Expert Participant –

1. Analyzes multiple details of child's needs and abilities
2. Evaluates differences in programming
3. Tracks programming to child's outcomes
4. Reports ongoing actions taken to contribute to child's special education programming

   Indicative Comment -"-*"She spent two years in first grade. Ritalin didn't work. She has a nonverbal learning disability. At a new independent evaluation we found her IQ dropped 10 points...She gets speech but it is articulation, which is not what she needs...The reading specialist was replaced with someone who never taught reading.*

After discussing the groupings and jointly coding some interviews, the authors independently coded 20 percent of the interviews chosen at random. Inter-rater reliability was determined by using the formula, number of agreements divided by number of agreements plus disagreements. With an inter-rater reliability of 89 percent, it was determined that it was appropriate for a single coder to categorize the rest of the respondents.

Using the level of participation categories described above, we found the following distribution of parents in our sample. Despite the fact that we had IEPs indicating students were receiving services, nine parents (10.8%) responded their child was not in special education. Twenty-eight parents (33.7%) fit the category Naïve Participants. That is they acknowledged their child's participation in special education, but throughout the entire interview made only vague references to the child's needs and services. Thus 45 percent of the parents in this district that prided itself on its support for parents did not appear to be conversant with their child's needs and services. One can only conclude that they were primarily recipients of the information provided by the professional members of the Team rather than discerning contributors.

Slightly, over a third (36.1%) of the parents expressed the knowledge and skills to be coded as Novice Participants and 19.3 percent as Intermediate Participants. Interestingly, no one in our sample was coded as an Expert Participant. Nevertheless, we knew that individuals with these abilities existed in the community because some sought us out to discuss not only their own child's situation, but the quality of services throughout the system. These individuals, who were well known in the district, were often referred to by school personnel as "troublemakers." However, we found many of their concerns, e.g., specialists scheduled for more hours of direct service than they had time to deliver, justified, but unreported by our random sample of parents. The potential for disagreement

raises the question of how willing school systems are to assist parents to become knowledgeable, critically thinking IEP Team members.

Since basic communication skills are required to communicate knowledge and gain understanding required to begin contributing to the Team process, we questioned whether parents whose first language was not English would be disproportionately represented in the lowest levels. Because the sample contained relatively few Non-Participants, for further analysis they were combined with the Novice Participants. It is interesting to note that when we used the home language coding provided by the school district we found little difference in participation group. However, in several instances teachers, interviewers or the records indicated a foreign language was spoken at home even though district codes indicated otherwise. When these individuals were recoded, foreign language was found to be significantly related to the parent's grouping. These findings suggest that this community needed to extend its outreach and training to its newest arrivals. However, it should be pointed out that the number of English speakers in the two lowest participation levels exceeds those whose primary language is not English. It would be inappropriate to concentrate only on foreign-born parents.

Table 1

Home Language by Level of Parent Participation

Home Language	Levels of Participation			Total
	Non Participant & Naive	Novice	Intermediate	
English	22 59.5%	26 86.7%	14 87.5%	62 74.7%
Foreign	15 40.5%	4 13.3%	2 12.5%	21 25.3%
Total	37 100.0%	30 100.0%	16 100.0%	83 100.0%

x^2 (2, N = 83) = 8.21, p <.02

Other researchers (Mathews, 1998; Smith, 2001) have noted that economic concerns such as the necessity to work and to provide for child care hamper parents' ability to participate in the IEP process. To see whether income was related to parents' participation level, we looked at the percentage of families in the participation levels eligible for free or reduced lunch. The findings indicate lower income does not preclude parents from higher participation. At the same time the trend in the data while not statistically significant is indicative that income is related to the ability to participate. There is undoubtedly some correlation between being a newcomer to the country and low income and of course, those unfamiliar with our education system require time to learn about special education.

Table 2

Free and Reduced Lunch by Level of Parent Participation

Lunch Type	Levels of Participation			Total
	Non Participant & Naive	Novice	Intermediate	
Free or Reduced	16 47.1%	10 35.7%	2 12.5%	28 35.9%
Regular	18 52.9%	18 64.3%	14 87.5%	50 64.1%
Total	34 100.0%	30 100.0%	16 100.0%	78 100.0%

x^2 (2, N = 78) = 5.65, p <.059

Earlier when we looked at parents' ratings of overall ratings of service and of their child's academic progress we found positively skewed ratings. Might the more discerning parents be most critical? A comparison of the mean ratings of the parents in the highest versus the lowest levels however found no significant difference.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This data supports the findings of Gibb, et al. (1997) and Green and Shinn (1995) that parents' assessments of special education programs are not based on objective data. Some parents made comments that were inconsistent with their ratings, many when asked why they gave their ratings did not respond with objective data about a change in their child behavior, and some parents gave high ratings when data from other sources indicated children were not succeeding. These findings continue to raise questions about the validity of parents' perceptions and consequently of their ability to be equal participants in assessing and developing their children's services.

The findings suggest that ratings of parent satisfaction are biased in a positive direction. This means that if parents' assessments are used to justify continuing and/or expanding programs, we may promote programs that by more objective criteria do not meet children's needs. Researchers and evaluators need to be aware of this possibility and gather multiple sources of information to evaluate programs.

If parents are to be active participants in developing, monitoring and revising their child's IEP, as IDEA is promoting, they need to be more knowledgeable. The amount of information needed to begin to evaluate the quality of services for a single child is substantial. In addition, the parents' knowledge burden is ongoing because the information available and required varies as the child develops and annually changes placement. If a school system that prides itself in having multiple parent supports in place still has almost half of the parents not even conversant about their child's special education, the percentage of parents who are not meeting federal guidelines for active

decision making in their child's education is likely to be considerably higher in systems where parent supports are lacking.

What can be done about parents' lack of expertise? First, professionals and advocates at the national, state, and local level need to truly recognize how much information parents need to absorb to become knowledgeable and how difficult it is to gain this information. Parents could benefit from constituencies at all levels increasing their support for parents. For example, publications such as Knoblauch's (2001) Rights and Responsibilities of Parents of Children with Disabilities could be more widely disseminated and could include more detail on how to do things such as, "how to monitor your child's progress." Required student progress reports could include a parent section describing ways in which parents could be helpful over the coming months. For example, they could target key behaviors for parents to observe in order to help determine a child's reaction to a particular teaching approach. Clearly school districts and the parent advisory groups need to extend their outreach and the information and workshops they provide.

In sum, until parents learn what to look for to evaluate their child's services and progress, they will not be able to be accountable for their children's education. They will be minor contributors, not full Team members of the IEP process. Unanswered, however, is the critical question of whether school districts truly want parents as full Team members.

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